

# Houston Area Model United Nations Standard Committee

# DISEC



Chair | Manan Khandelwal  
Topic B

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# Note to Delegates

Delegates,

My name is Manan Khandelwal, I am a sophomore aerospace engineering major at Texas A&M University, and I am ecstatic to serve as your chair at HAMUN 49 this year for the Disarmament and International Security, or DISEC, Committee!

This year, DISEC will focus debate over the control and regulation of autonomous weapons systems and the creation of a global framework for arms classification and illicit trade control. Both topics are relevant as the issue of oversight has become increasingly paramount in the age of strategic arms development and rising global tensions, and nations are left scrambling to protect themselves from this new arms race.

If this is your first time at HAMUN, welcome, and thank you for choosing DISEC! If you are a returning delegate, welcome back, and I hope to see how you leverage your experience to shape this debate.

My expectations for all of you as delegates are not to know everything, nor to be the first to signal a motion every time. Instead, I expect you to have fun debating topics you truly enjoy and are curious about, and the best way to do that is to simply stay updated and absorb information. Feel free to reach out if you have any questions. Good luck!

**Manan Khandelwal**

Chair of DISEC

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# Topic Overview

The global arms trade is the international transfer of both conventional and non-conventional weapons, including small arms and light weapons (SALW), heavy weapons, and warships. Valued at \$112 billion as of 2020 and rapidly growing, it is a complex industry that involves a wide range of actors, including but not limited to governments and private entities. The rise of new regional powers, the growing instability in cross-border relations, and the increasing demand from non-state actors such as terrorist groups and organized crime syndicates have been the key contributors to this growth, but the continued existence of the industry lies primarily in the profitability of the military-industrial complex for the foremost militaries in the world.

The top exporter of arms in the world is the United States, followed by Russia, France, China, and Germany – together, these nations account for 75% of all arms trades globally.



**Fig. 1: Shipment of firearms seized from the Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria**

In contrast, regions like the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa are the main importers of arms, as they are home to some of the most geopolitically unstable and conflict-prone nations. While some support the argument that the arms trade plays a significant role in national security and conflict deterrence, it is also undoubtedly responsible for fueling regional wars and supporting human rights abuses and terrorist activities. Furthermore, leaks in the system give rise to a sizable market for the illicit trade of weapons to non-state actors, which serves as the foundation for our second topic of discussion.

The illegal arms trade encompasses a wide range of weapons, from small arms and light weapons (SALWs) to heavy weaponry and explosives. However, SALWs account for the vast majority of illicit weapons transactions, making up an estimated 85% of the global illegal arms trade. **We will use the example of SALWs to depict the scale of the problem for this section of the background guide, however, please note that DISEC wishes to focus on the entire market during the session.**

The illicit trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) is a pressing global concern, contributing to violence in the most politically unstable and corrupt regions worldwide. This issue is exacerbated by the uncontrolled supply of arms to entities dedicated to instigating unrest. Current estimates indicate that over 1 billion SALWs are in circulation globally, with a staggering 80% held by civilians and de facto military organizations. The impact is starkly evident in the annual casualty figures, with more lives lost to SALWs than to traditional military hardware such as attack aircraft, main battle tanks, and missiles. This alarming trend

highlights the severe consequences of unregulated arms distribution, particularly when weapons fall into the hands of terrorist organizations through illegal channels. Urgent attention and international cooperation are imperative to address and curb the uncontrolled trade of SALWs, as they pose a great threat to global peace and stability.

Given its controversial reputation, there have been continued efforts by international entities to curb the spread of the arms trade, with special emphasis on the illegal side of the market. Many regional blocs, such as the African Union and NATO, have signed treaties underlining the proliferation of the illegal arms trade, but the most popular arms trade control document to date has been the Arms Trade Treaty (to be discussed later). Noting the significance of the arms trade in maintaining bilateral relations between allied countries, it is imperative to understand that a complete ban on trade and impractical and should be left out of consideration.

As a result, The Disarmament and International Security Committee encourages incoming delegates to tackle the problem from its root by starting with the improved classification of arms to account for upcoming technologies. This will help the committee establish a line of reasoning behind the current state of the illegal arms trade, which will





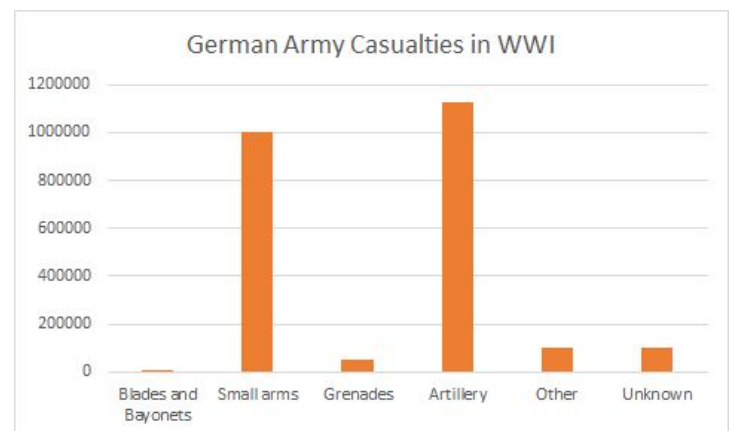
subsequently foster a productive debate on how we can establish firm oversight on this growing issue. Alternatively, this committee is also heavily interested in unique solutions that can positively impact the solution without making undue compromises.

# History

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the foundation for the international arms trade was laid out by the British during the Triangular Trade of the 15th and 16th Centuries, when Britain shipped goods such as firearms, beer, and cloth to Africa. The market then expanded rapidly starting with the American Revolutionary War in the 18th century, when revolutionary militia from all countries depended on foreign exports and illegal trade to arm the general populace.

Years of global turmoil over the next century took a turn for the worse in 1914 with the onset of World War 1, when the United States alone expanded their military exports by a

magnitude of 58, and other nations, such as Britain, France, Russia, Japan, and Germany, began their large-scale production of arms. Smaller countries, such as Russia and Japan, began to contract the manufacturing of military equipment with other countries, whereas larger countries like Britain produced rifles, machine guns, airplanes, artillery pieces, and artillery shells in the order of thousands and millions alone.



**Fig. 2: Small arms were one of the two primary reasons for German casualties**

A very similar trend followed in the Second World War as the value of the global arms market increased by a factor of 1,600% - from \$12 billion to \$200 billion. The Cold War observed a steep increase in the valuation of the arms market due to the competition

between the two global superpowers, regional unrest, nuclear deterrence, and the introduction of proxy wars in places like Korea and Vietnam. Today, the weapons trade is worth hundreds of billions of dollars, with the global military budget hitting an all-time high of \$2.2 trillion in 2022.

Country	Total Sales
1. Saudi Arabia	\$25.8 billion
2. Egypt	\$17.1 billion
3. Israel	\$15.2 billion
4. Taiwan	\$15.0 billion
5. Australia	\$10.5 billion
6. Japan	\$9.4 billion
7. South Korea	\$9.3 billion
8. Iraq	\$8.9 billion
9. United Kingdom	\$6.6 billion
10. United Arab Emirates	\$6.3 billion

**Fig. 3: Top 10 customers of US weapons between 2003 – 2016**

Shedding light on the specific topic at hand, the trade of illegal arms has closely followed the growth mentioned above. One of the earliest instances of illicit arms trade can be traced back to the post-Napoleonic era in the 19th century. The surplus arms from various European conflicts found their way into the hands of non-state actors and insurgent groups, shaping the dynamics



of regional conflicts. As industrialization progressed, the production of arms became more sophisticated, and the trade in weaponry expanded to meet the demands of various actors operating outside the confines of official state channels.

The two World Wars of the 20th century marked a significant turning point in the global arms trade. The surplus of military equipment after both conflicts became a lucrative source for those seeking arms outside legal frameworks. The Cold War further intensified this phenomenon, with major powers supplying weapons to proxies and allied nations, often bypassing international norms and regulations.

During the Cold War, weapons trade was based on political affiliation and there was a duopoly in the market between the USA and the USSR, but it has since been deregulated with the collapse of the USSR. There are limited statistics available on the value of the illicit trade of weapons, but a study conducted in 2002 showed that the value of trafficked SALWs was a quarter of the value of all SALWs sold until that year.

The end of the Cold War brought about a complex reconfiguration of the global arms trade. As geopolitical alliances shifted, surplus weapons flooded the market, finding their way into the hands



of rebel groups, terrorists, and criminal organizations. The dissolution of states and the rise of non-state actors in various conflicts heightened the demand for arms, and the illegal arms trade became a critical factor in sustaining and escalating regional conflicts.

Today, the illicit arms trade operates through a complex network of intermediaries, brokers, and facilitators who exploit porous borders, weak governance, and corrupt officials to move weapons across continents. The internet has further facilitated the trade, providing a platform for anonymous transactions and enabling buyers to circumvent traditional channels. In 2019, the Small Arms Survey estimated that armed violence caused over 242,000 deaths worldwide, with many of these fatalities attributed to illicit weapons. Additionally, a recent incident that highlights the pervasiveness of the illegal arms trade is the seizure of 2,500 AK-47 assault rifles in the Gulf of Aden in March 2023. These weapons, believed to be en route to Yemen, underscored the ongoing flow of illicit weapons to conflict zones, fueling violence and prolonging the humanitarian crisis.

The unpredictability of the global illicit arms trade is primarily due to a combination of three factors:

1) Globalization and the increasingly complex network of arms dealers have made it impossible to trace connections and eliminate the source of the problem. The internet has become a hotspot for underground deals, enabling arms brokers to operate in the shadows.

2) Existing legislation lacks oversight, accountability, and the power to impose sanctions on member-states that violate the rules set in previous resolutions. This is primarily because of the lack of a unified solution, as countries push their agendas to create a disparate, fragmented regulatory framework. The absence of robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, along with the corruption deeply embedded in many key governments, is also a contributor to the lack of accountability for those involved in the illegal arms trade.

3) The advancement of weapons technology has outpaced the guidelines laid out by previous legislatures, so both public and private entities find loopholes to safeguard their defense secrets and avoid injunctions by the international community. We will explore these factors in depth over the next section of this background guide.





# The Problem Today

The first step to establishing limits on the trade of illicit weapons is understanding the source of the problem. Continuing the example of SALWs, almost all firearms in the black market were originally manufactured under government control, came from military stockpiles, or were bought from licensed gun dealers. The black market is ultimately sustained by the relatively easy access to legal weapons, and small arms make an attractive choice due to their availability, cost, lethality, and ease of transport. As a result, they are present in virtually every society.

The globalization of financial, commercial, transportation, and communications networks has enabled buyers and sellers to locate each other, identify points of common interest, and establish terms of cooperation. Still, organizing illegal arms sales involves a large amount of skill, organization, preparation, and financial resources – forging documents, bribing officials, persuading legitimate arms companies

to sell their weapons, laundering money, and recruiting aircrews are all part of the job. As this process is illegal, it is next to impossible to independently obtain the knowledge and contacts required to carry out trades. Arms brokers thus play an essential role in supplying illegal groups with weapons – without their activities, this supply would be much more difficult.

Governments and international organizations have attempted to restrict the supply of arms via black markets, but we will shed light on some UN-sponsored legislation adopted in the 21st century. The first document of this kind is the Firearms Protocol (2001), which establishes a framework for member-states to cooperatively mitigate and criminalize the illicit weapons trade. Another document is the International Tracing Instrument (2005), which mandates member-states to establish and maintain a national tracing system for firearms while cooperating in tracking these weapons



across borders. The most well-known of these documents is the Arms Trade Treaty (2013), which is a legally binding document that requires states to consider illegal channels of trading conventional weapons before authorizing a transfer. As of December 2022, 113 states have ratified or acceded to the ATT, including six of the world's top 10 arms producers – China, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The adoption of the ATT by an overwhelming majority of countries was deemed a massive success at the time, as it became one of the first legally binding documents on the topic of regulating the global arms trade as a whole. Under the ATT's regulation, the transfer of arms is deemed unacceptable under the following conditions:

- 1) The transfer violates obligations under Chapter VII of the Charter of the UN,
- 2) The transfer violates obligations to other international agreements to which the State is a Party,
- 3) The State knows at the time of authorization that the arms or items will be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, or breaches of the four Geneva Conventions.

Additional instruments, such as UNSC sanctions, embargoes on the trade of arms to certain countries, and technical assistance/training on arms control laws are in place to support the aforementioned resolutions, but to limited success. For example, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on several individuals and entities involved in the illicit arms trade in Libya, freezing their assets and banning travel in all forms.

While each of the three resolutions has seen varying success in raising awareness of the problem and promoting international cooperation to address it, they have yet to make a significant impact on the state of the market as depicted earlier. An example of a loophole in the ATT is the lack of regulation of the trade of ammunition, spare parts, and other components, allowing irresponsible and corrupt parties to circumvent arms embargoes. Overarching reasons for the limited success of previous regulations include the lack of universal participation, weak implementation, corruption, the everlasting demand for weapons, and weak international border security to name a few, but your task as a delegate is to use the failures of those documents as a launchpad to craft your stance and cooperate in creating an effective resolution of our own.





# Questions to Consider

With the background set in stone, it is now your task to reflect on the history of the topic and previous legislation to determine the right course of action for our committee. Here are some questions you may consider to guide your delegation's argument as you research the topic and prepare for the conference:

1. What is your country's role in the global arms trade – are you an importer or exporter?
2. How would imposing restrictions on the global arms trade impact your economy and domestic/foreign policy?
3. Are there other sources of legislation not mentioned above that play an important role in limiting the illicit arms trade?
4. What exactly is it that we need to change about our current legislation, and why?
5. How is current legislation enforced?
6. What are the best ways to be able to enforce new rules given the United Nations' present capabilities of oversight?
7. What would the impact of curbing arms trade have on the private defense industry?
8. Should we update and amend existing treaties, or should we scrap everything and start from scratch?
9. Why do we need to classify weapons and how does it apply to restricting the illegal weapon market?

An important thing to remember about this conference is that it is okay if your country does not support creating a new framework to classify arms or curbing the arms trade at all, seeing that some countries invest much more heavily in technology than others. This may be because of war profiteering, the leverage of the private defense industry, or a country's militaristic needs among many other factors. Inevitably, the key to success at a Model United Nations conference is staying true to your country's perspectives, regardless of their relevance to the topic. The international community will never make unanimous decisions on a topic because of conflicting cultures and values, and this committee will emphasize a direct representation of this disagreement instead of simply agreeing on a resolution that is not true to your country.

The best delegates are the ones who fight for what their people believe in, not what they believe in or what they think others will agree with. With that said, I wish you the best of luck and I look forward to seeing you in Houston on conference day!







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